

Developing Professional Status: Child Welfare Workers, Social Workers and Social Educators in Norwegian Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of how the position of employees with a bachelor's degree related to social work in Norwegian schools has developed from 1997-2024. The analyses are based on administrative data on education and labour market outcomes made available by Statistics Norway. The occupational codes used are interpreted as the outcome of jurisdictional negotiations across legal, public, and workplace arenas, in line with Abbott's theory of professional development. While the number and proportion of social work professionals in schools have increased, recognition of their competence—as reflected in occupation, salary and employment percentage—varies. Meanwhile, employment as assistants has remained consistent, highlighting school social work as a fragile jurisdiction. Their employment may also be legitimised as individual rights to special education, potentially explaining a stronger position for social educators.

Keywords

School social work, professional status, child welfare workers, social workers, social educators, welfare-state professions

Introduction

School is, and has historically been, a contested site for debates about schooling, learning, inclusion, and the development of democracy, where actors with different competences and perspectives shape the school (Højholt & Kousholt, 2020). This paper explores the evolving status of one such group of actors: the social work professions in Norwegian schools.

In recent decades, expectations of schools have expanded internationally, both in relation to inclusive education, as articulated in the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994), and to the care of students' mental health and well-being (Margaretha et al., 2023). During this period, school social work has been described as a growing field of expertise focused on supporting students' well-being, both individually and through school-wide preventative measures (Huxtable, 2022). However, professional roles, qualifications and organisation vary across contexts, making cross-national comparison challenging.

Within the Scandinavian states, schools have integrated new professions concerned with the social aspects of schooling to varying degrees and through different arrangements. In Sweden, social workers have been legally required as part of the school health service for students since 2010 (Perlinski et al., 2026). In Denmark, social pedagogues have been integrated into everyday school practices following a reform in 2014 (Thingstrup et al., 2018), while social workers have not been systematically integrated into schools (Strandby et al., 2023). These developments illustrate that the state plays a key role in regulating which professions are granted formal recognition within a welfare-state context.

In Norway, no regulatory requirements govern social work or social pedagogic professions in schools. However, according to figures from professional unions, child welfare workers, social workers and social educators have been increasingly employed in Norwegian schools since the 1990s (Borg et al., 2015; Håvie, 2012). These professions are often collectively referred to as social workers and may be seen as representing a perspective characterised by a holistic understanding of individuals within their social and societal contexts (Henriksen et al., 2025). Because they all hold bachelor's degrees related to social work (BSW), they may collectively be referred to as BSW professionals (Singstad et al., 2024). Social educators originated in the care of people with intellectual disabilities (Messel, 2013). They hold dual qualifications, as they are also licensed healthcare personnel.

Professions are continuously shaped by shifts in societal needs, changes in the objective foundations of their work, and competition with other occupational groups (Abbott, 1988). Professional development can be understood as negotiating professional boundaries through claims to jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). Welfare-state professions are granted authority to perform tasks on behalf of society to meet fundamental needs of the population (Alexandra & Miller, 2003). At the macro level, the status of a welfare-state profession may be understood as a contractual relationship with the state, which provides legitimacy for professional claims to jurisdiction and influence in public and policy processes in their field of expertise (Eriksen & Molander, 2008). This institutional legitimacy underpins jurisdictional negotiations at the workplace level.

The legitimacy of the BSW professions has developed within specific welfare institutions that have constituted an important part of the objective foundation of their work. As these institutions have evolved, the professions have adapted and are now present in a range of institutions where their shared generalist competence is relevant (Henriksen et al., 2024). While they are recognised as welfare-state professions, their entry into schools may represent a new phase of professional development.

Recently, the authorities have stated that there is a need for more information about occupational groups in schools other than teachers (Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). A report from Statistics Norway documents the presence, educational backgrounds and employment characteristics of such personnel in student-related work in 2022. At that time, there were 3,006 BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools, making them a small group within the school workforce (Steffensen & Dystland, 2024). While this report shows that the majority of BSW professionals are engaged in student-related work, research on school social work and BSW professionals' roles and status in Norwegian schools remains limited (Singstad et al., 2024). Some peer-reviewed qualitative studies (Eek et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Michelsen, 2019) and case and survey reports (Bergene et al., 2021; Mordal, 2017; Nyhus et al., 2014) have addressed the topic. Several studies across Scandinavia have explored the developing roles and status of these newer professions in schools through the lens of jurisdictional negotiations (Eek et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017). In Norwegian schools, the lack of formal regulation and legal requirements may contribute to unclear roles and status at the workplace level while also creating opportunities for locally developed roles (Berg et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Singstad et al., 2024).

Drawing on the concept of jurisdiction, professional status here refers to the degree to which a profession is recognised as having legitimate authority over areas of professional work. Given the absence of formal jurisdiction in schools, the extent to which BSW professionals are recognised and positioned at the workplace level may provide an indication of how the profession's status is developing within the educational field. Since current knowledge about their occupational positioning is largely limited to local contexts or specific points in time, the empirical basis for discussions about their position as a group within the field of education

has been limited. Accordingly, this study explores their evolving professional status through the following research question:

How have the employment patterns of BSW professionals in Norwegian compulsory schools developed from 1997-2024?

This study analyses measurable indicators that reflect how BSW professionals have been positioned within schools over an extended period by combining educational and occupational data from Statistics Norway. To understand this development in the context of changing school conditions, the following section provides relevant background information.

Division of labour in the context of Norwegian schools

Unlike many other countries, most children in Norway attend public schools (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2025). Since 1997, children have entered school at the age of six, and ten years of schooling have been compulsory. Schools are expected to meet the needs of all children, who have the right to attend their local school (Education Act, 2023). Norwegian schools are governed through a system in which the state sets the overall framework, while municipalities interpret and implement it at the local level (Sivesind, 2024). The absence of formal regulation and national guidelines for employing non-teaching professionals is justified by the need for local autonomy, as professional roles and service needs may vary between schools and areas (NOU 2019:23).

A major reform in 1992 reduced the number of specialised schools and increased student diversity in mainstream education. Since Norway's commitment to the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, inclusion has been mentioned with increasing frequency in education policy (Haug, 2024), alongside a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020)). However, remedial measures such as alternative learning arenas, specialised departments and specialised schools still exist. The number of students in alternative arenas has even increased over time (Nordahl et al., 2018).

While schools are required to provide access to school health services and educational-psychological counselling services, the professionals delivering these services are usually employed externally, and schools have been characterised by a mono-professional structure. Teachers have traditionally worked alongside teaching assistants in supporting roles. This division of labour reflects early welfare-state arrangements, in which one occupation holds full jurisdiction while others occupy supporting or subordinate roles (Erichsen, 1996).

Teachers' workplace jurisdiction remains strong, as they are still the only school-employed profession with legally mandated responsibility for student-related work. Statutory student-teacher ratios introduced in 2018 further reinforce their presence (Pedersen et al., 2022). Teachers' roles encompass both didactic and social-pedagogical aspects of education. In pri-

mary schools, much guidance related to social and emotional difficulties is provided by students' contact teachers (Singstad et al., 2024). Most secondary schools have a guidance counsellor position, which has traditionally been held by teachers (Michelsen, 2019).

From the 1990s onwards, education policy shifted towards a stronger focus on learning outcomes (Prøitz, 2014). Curriculum reforms aligned with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) policies, alongside increased external control inspired by new public management, have pressured teachers' professional autonomy (Askling et al., 2016). Teachers' roles have expanded as new responsibilities have been added, with expectations layered onto existing tasks rather than replacing them (Caspersen et al., 2026). As demands on schools have become more complex, teachers' jurisdiction has expanded accordingly.

The introduction of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools

Increased complexity is also problematised in policies calling for other types of professionals in schools. Several policy papers have highlighted enhanced interprofessional collaboration, beginning with the government paper *Time for Learning*, which emphasised enabling teachers to concentrate on their core task of teaching (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010)). Students' right to a safe psychosocial learning environment and the social and emotional needs of an increasingly diverse student population have also been highlighted (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020); Meld. St. 20 (2012-2013); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024); NOU 2010:7; NOU 2019:23). Service development and research projects have been initiated by the authorities to promote more inclusive schools (Nordhagen et al., 2022) and interprofessional collaboration within and across services through initiatives such as *The support network for the students* (Borg et al., 2014; Borg et al., 2022). BSW professionals have participated in some of these initiatives as milieu therapists, indicating opportunities for new areas of work despite the absence of formal regulation.

Milieu therapist is a common occupational title for BSW professionals across a range of welfare arenas and is the preferred designation used by the professions' unions for BSW professionals working in schools. In schools, milieu therapy is not therapy in a clinical sense; rather it involves planned and systematic efforts to promote students' well-being, participation, learning and social development (Borg & Lyng, 2019). Both the teachers' union and the BSW union describe school-based milieu therapists as undertaking preventative work at individual, group and organisational levels, as well as working with individual students based on special education decisions (Nyhus et al., 2014). However, milieu therapist is not a protected title, and BSW professionals may compete with special education teachers, paraprofessionals with certificates in child and youth care and unqualified staff, all of whom may be involved in school-based social support (Bergene et al., 2021).

The increased presence of BSW professionals in schools has been interpreted as a response to locally identified needs (Borg et al., 2015). For newly introduced occupational groups, clear leadership support can be crucial to their integration and to strengthening their professional

status within the school organisation (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Michelsen, 2019). However, previous findings indicate uncertainty about how school leaders perceive BSW professionals. Non-peer-reviewed reports examining how employees with different educational backgrounds are utilised suggest differences in the roles of BSW professionals. Social educators appear more closely linked to students with diagnoses and special education needs than social workers and child welfare workers (Bergene et al., 2021; Borg et al., 2015). Child welfare workers and social workers are most often reported to work as milieu therapists. While this is also common among social educators, they are more frequently reported to work as assistants, teachers and special educators than the other two groups (Bergene et al., 2021).

In a qualitative study, Eek et al. (2024) examined school leaders' rationales for employing social educators in primary schools. They found that school leaders referred to students' increasingly complex needs and emphasised the value of hiring autonomous professionals who were present throughout the school week. Special education decisions also appeared central to leaders' legitimisation of employing BSW professionals (Eek et al., 2024). In both this study and a report on schools that had actively prioritised milieu therapists (Borg & Lyng, 2019), school leaders placed greater emphasis on the generalist competence of BSW professionals than on distinctions between their specific educational backgrounds.

By mapping all BSW professionals employed in Norwegian schools over an extended period and analysing group-level patterns, this study examines how the status of BSW professions has developed, both collectively and across distinct professional groups. The absence of designated roles and statutory requirements makes BSW professions in Norwegian schools an informative case for examining how professional status develops locally in response to welfare-state needs under conditions of weak formal jurisdiction and high local autonomy.

Data description

The analyses are based on administrative data on education and labour market outcomes from Statistics Norway. These data enable detailed examination of individuals' educational backgrounds and professional profiles. We draw on registers covering education, income (tax records) and employment for the period 1997-2024. The dataset includes all individuals employed in ordinary primary and lower secondary schools (corresponding to NACE code 80.120 until 2007 and code 85.201 thereafter). This includes both private and public schools. Private schools constitute approximately 10% of all schools (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). From 2007 onwards, occupational codes are available, enabling analysis of the occupations held within schools. All occupational codes in Statistics Norway describe both the type of work performed and the educational level required.

BSW professionals can be identified using both occupational codes and educational data. We begin with educational data because we are interested in how BSW education is recognised. A BSW is defined as an individual who has completed a higher education degree in child wel-

fare, social work or social education at the time of employment measurement. However, individuals who also hold a teaching qualification in the year of analysis are classified as teachers. We define teachers in accordance with official statistics from Statistics Norway (Iversen et al., 2021). For the analyses of occupational codes, we apply a 50% threshold. From 2015 onwards, we use the agreed position percentage; for earlier years, we use a three-category classification of agreed working hours, in which the first category, short part-time, corresponds roughly to less than 50% of full-time employment.

As an additional indicator of competence recognition, we include salary data. To examine differences in wages, we use annual pension-qualifying income in the year of analysis. This measure includes all income from employment or self-employment but excludes capital income. To assess systematic differences in wages across occupational codes, we conduct multivariate analyses of estimated differences in standardised wages. To account for unobserved heterogeneity that could bias wage comparisons across occupational groups in schools, we include municipality and year fixed effects in all specifications. Municipality fixed effects absorb time-invariant local differences, such as labour market conditions and municipal pay practices, while year fixed effects control for nationwide wage trends and year-specific shocks. Our estimates therefore rely on within-municipality, within-year variation, reducing the risk that wage gaps reflect spatial or temporal confounders rather than genuine occupational differences. We additionally control for years since completion of BSW education (and its square, to allow for diminishing returns over time), employment share (full-time equivalent), and whether a master's degree has been obtained, accounting for experience, part-time work, and further qualification. Because employment share is only available from 2015 onwards, analyses controlling for it cover 2015-2024. Municipality fixed effects capture only time-invariant differences and do not account for time-varying local conditions, such as fluctuations in municipal finances or local labour market demand. To the extent that such factors are correlated with both occupational composition and wages, estimates may still be biased.

Results

The employment of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools

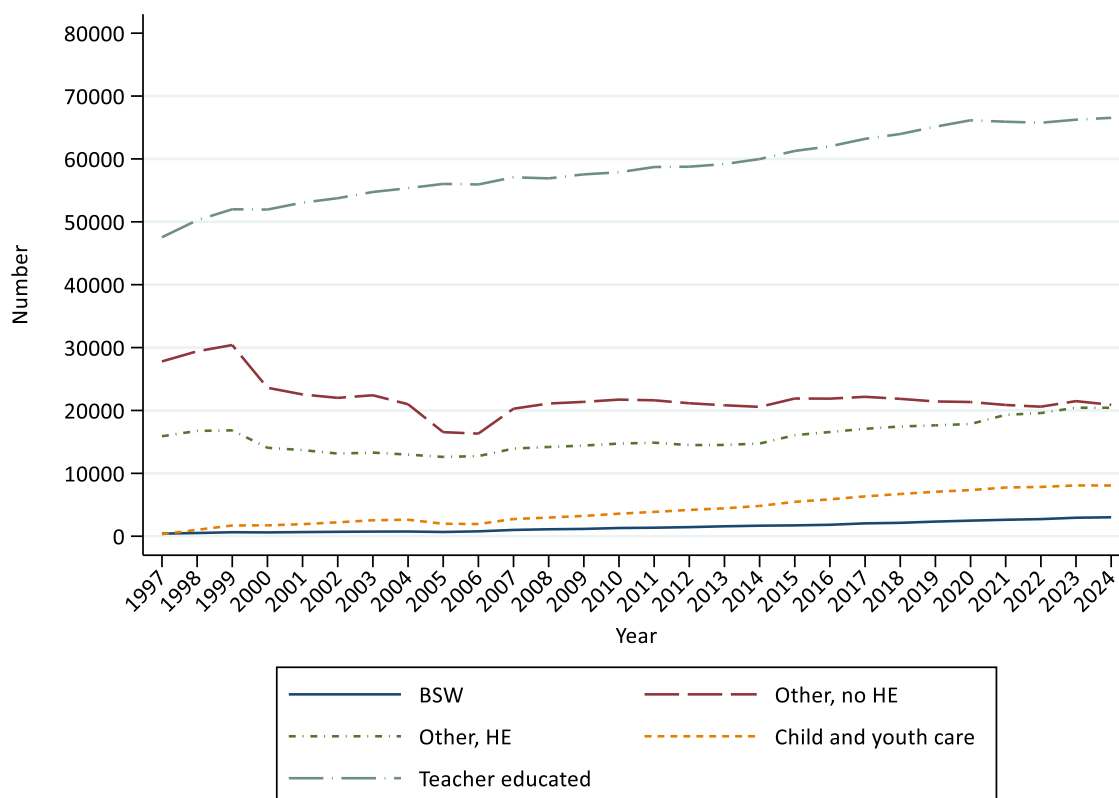
We found a steady increase in the number of school employees with a bachelor's degree in child welfare, social work or social education in Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, rising from 422 in 1997 to 3,016 in 2024. Their share of all school employees increased from 0.5% in 1997 to 2.8% in 2024. In 2024, 4.6% of all BSW-educated school employees had obtained a master's degree. The average employment percentage for BSW professionals in 2024 was 78.5%, compared with 92.9% for teachers.

As shown in Figure 1, the increase in BSW professionals in schools occurred alongside other changes in the school workforce. Vocational training in child and youth care was introduced in 1994, and the number of paraprofessionals holding this qualification increased steadily

from fewer than 1,000 to more than 8,000 in 2024. Compared with this pronounced growth, the increase in BSW professionals was more modest.

Figure 1

The development in number of school employees holding a teaching degree, child and youth care certificate, BSW degree, other higher education or no higher education, 1997-2024.

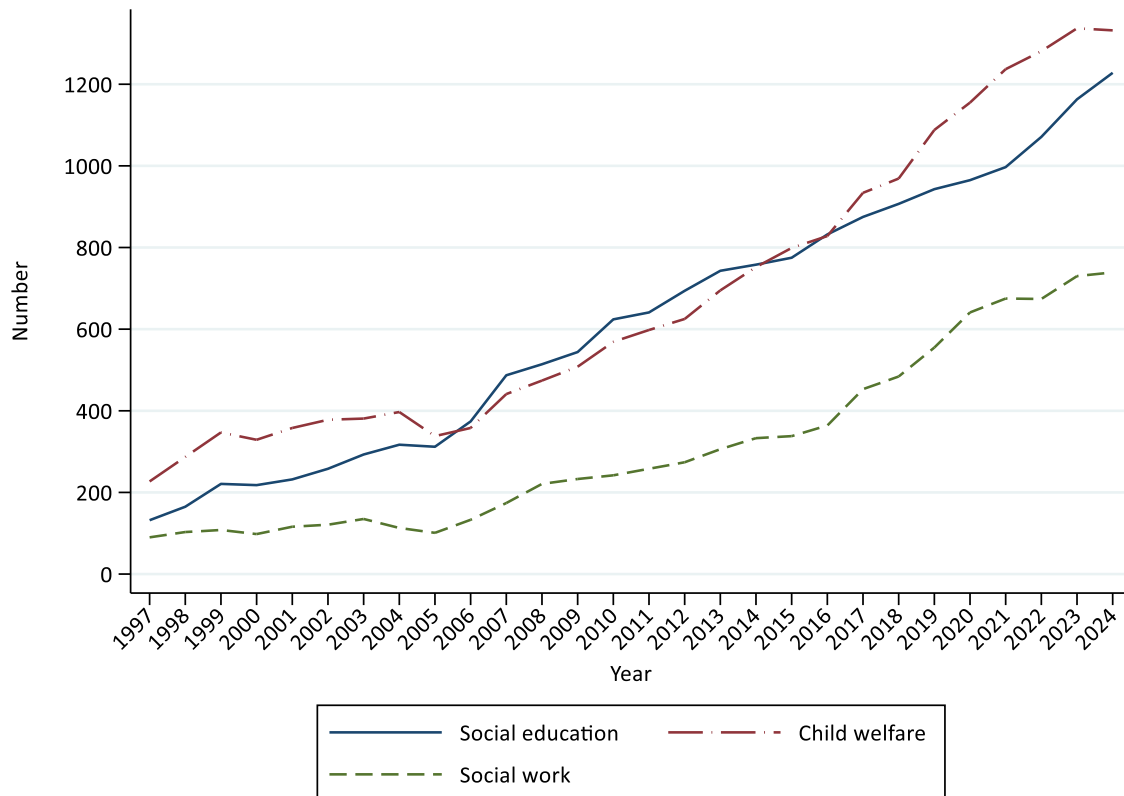


Changes were also evident in the “other” categories. The number of employees without higher education declined substantially, while the number with higher education increased moderately, reflecting a broader societal trend towards higher educational attainment. Teachers remained the dominant education group, increasing from approximately 48,000 employees in 1997 to more than 66,000 in 2024.

We next examined the distribution of BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools across the three educational backgrounds, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Number of BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools (grades 1-10), by type of BSW education



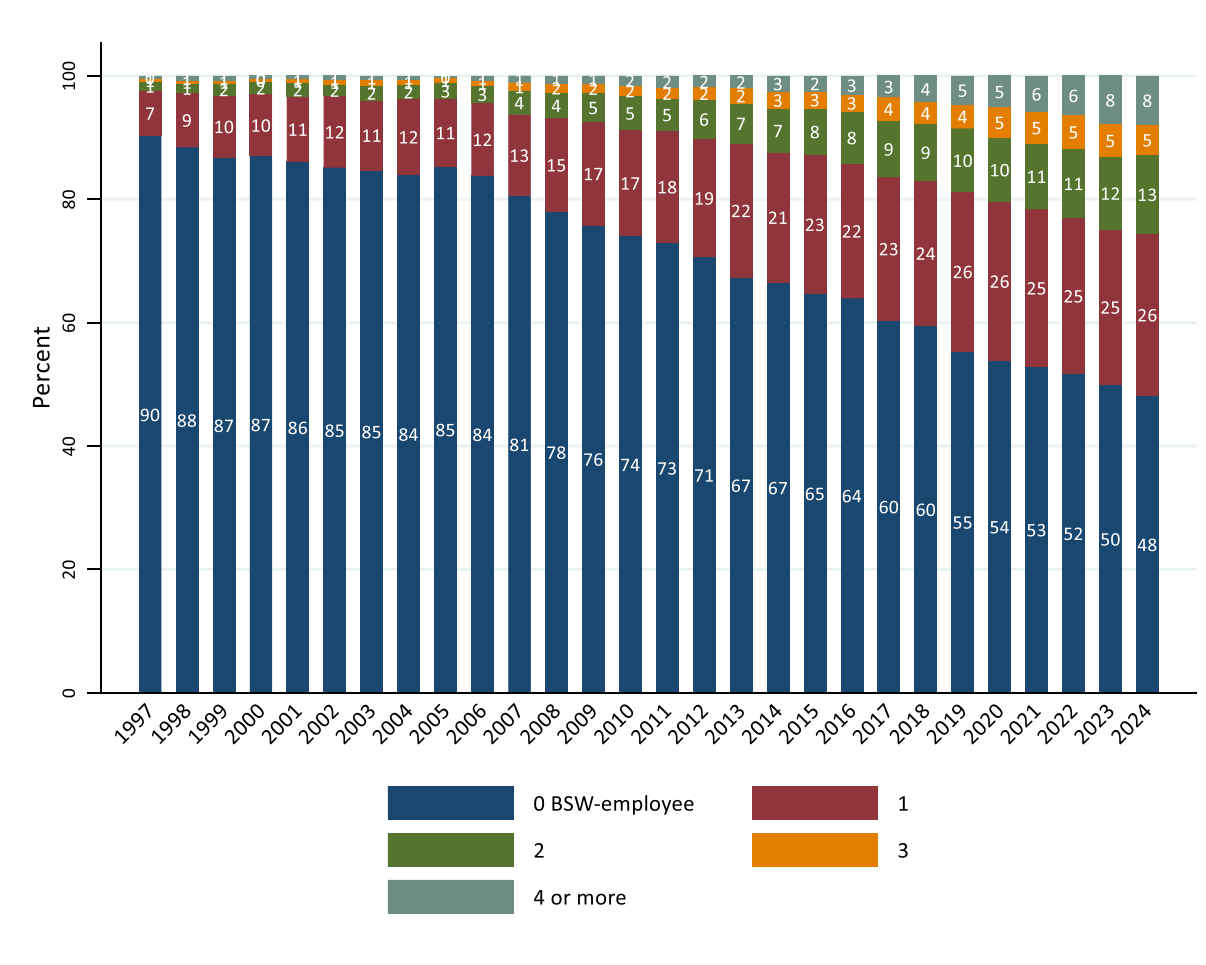
Throughout the period, social workers represented the smallest subgroup, while child welfare workers and social educators alternated as the largest. In 2024, BSW professionals employed in schools comprised 22% social workers, 37% social educators and 41% child welfare workers.

BSW professionals' distribution across schools

Since school leaders make employment decisions, changes in the number of schools employing BSW professionals may indicate shifts in their status. We therefore examined both the share of schools employing BSW professionals and their distribution across these schools from 1997 to 2024 (Figure 3). The proportion of schools employing BSW professionals increased substantially, from less than 10% in 1997 to 52% in 2024. Among schools employing BSW professionals, half had only one such employee in 2024. Some schools have prioritised employing larger numbers of BSW professionals as part of whole-school preventative strategies (Borg & Lyng, 2019), which may help explain the increase in schools employing four or more. However, our data do not capture variations in organisational structures, and other explanations, such as employing BSW professionals in alternative learning arenas, cannot be ruled out.

Figure 3

Share of schools employing 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or more BSW professionals



Although most BSW professionals did not work alongside another BSW colleague, there was an increasing trend towards schools employing more than one. This could indicate a strengthening of their position at the school level through access to a professional community of like-minded colleagues, even if limited to one or two individuals. However, this would depend on additional factors, such as the status associated with their occupation.

The occupations of BSW professionals in schools

Thus far, we have examined the prevalence of employees holding a bachelor's degree in child welfare, social work or social education in schools, regardless of their employment percentage or occupation. In the following analysis of occupational codes, we focus on employees potentially involved in day-to-day interprofessional collaboration and therefore include only BSW professionals with an employment percentage of 50% or higher.

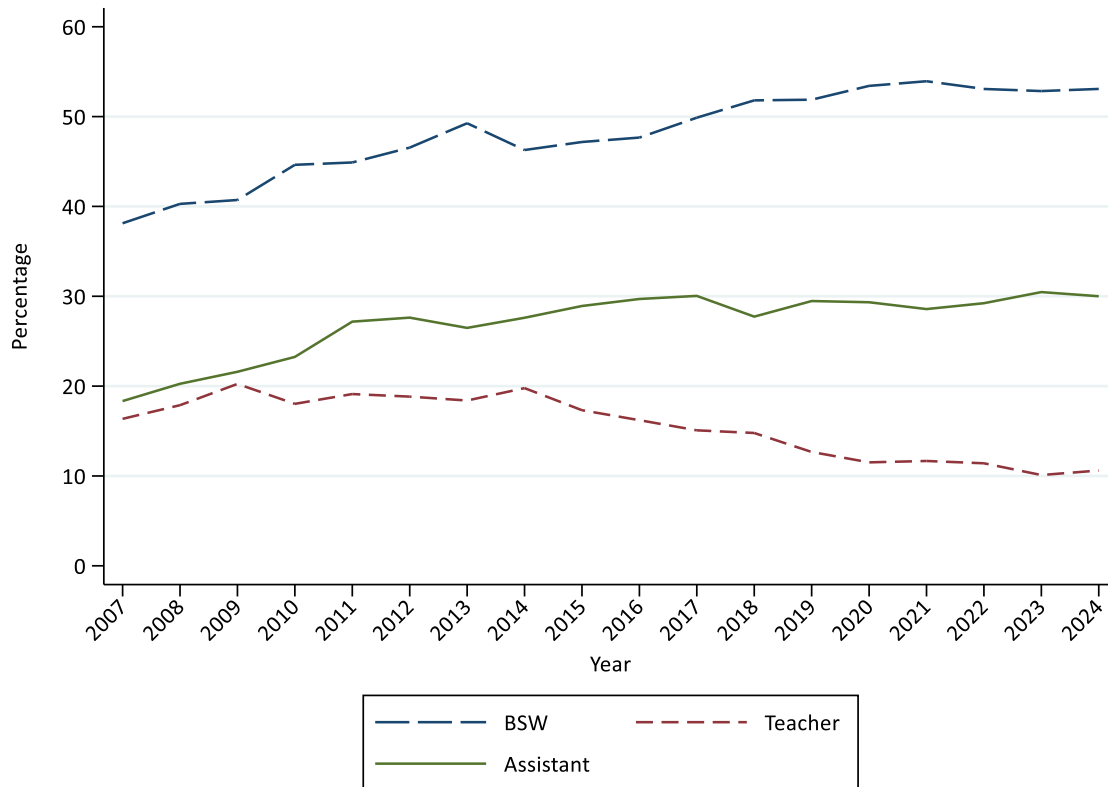
Across the period, school employees with a BSW degree were registered under more than 200 occupational codes, with varying required education levels and tasks. We created one

category for each of the three occupational codes directly linked to the respective BSW educational backgrounds. In addition, we analysed three occupational categories related to student-focused work in schools: *assistant*, *teacher* and *milieu therapist*. Together, these six categories covered the majority of BSW professionals. Fewer than 5% of BSW professionals were engaged in administrative roles. A small number were registered in other occupations, such as nurse or occupational therapist. Occupations unrelated to welfare, health or education were treated as missing in the analysis.

The *teacher* category included all positions in which teaching was the primary area of responsibility, including special education teachers. The *assistant* category comprised occupations requiring upper-secondary education or less, such as teacher assistant or social work assistant. Most BSW professionals in this category were employed as social work assistants, a role more closely involved with the school environment than that of a teacher assistant. The *milieu therapist* category comprised codes explicitly using the term milieu therapist, with or without reference to a specific educational background. When paired with an occupational code indicating bachelor-level education, the title social work assistant was also included. Only 0.4% of BSW professionals were registered under codes linked to the guidance counsellor position; these were included in the milieu therapist category. The distribution of BSW professionals across assistant, teacher, and BSW-relevant positions is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Percentage of BSW professionals employed as assistants, teachers or in occupations relevant to BSW education, 2007-2024



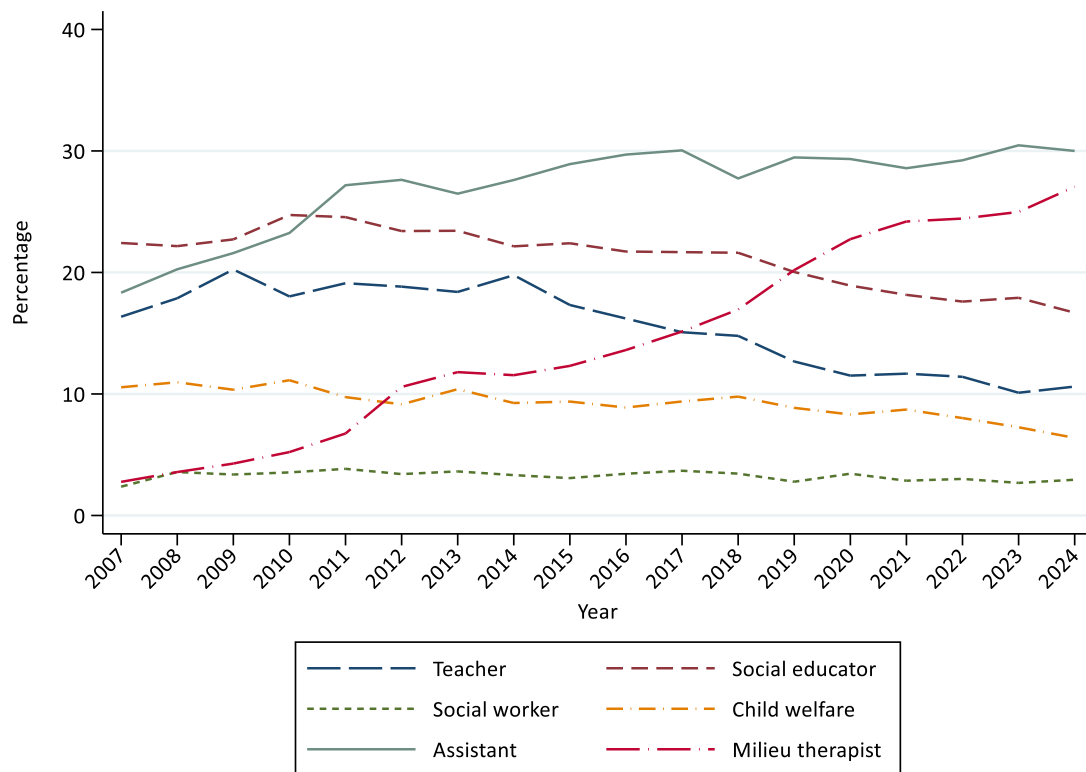
The share of BSW professionals registered as assistants has remained stable at approximately 30% since 2011. This suggests that part of the increase in BSW professionals in schools reflects their continued employment in roles that do not require higher education and are formally associated with lower degrees of professional autonomy. However, by 2024, 53% of BSW professionals were registered under occupational codes indicating the appropriate level of education and describing work relevant to their training. The use of these codes has increased over time, potentially indicating growing recognition of their competence as bachelor-level social work professionals. The declining proportion of BSW professionals employed as teachers supports this interpretation, suggesting a shift from teacher substitution towards social work.

To further explore occupational differentiation, we repeated the analysis by disaggregating BSW-relevant occupations into milieu therapist and education-specific subcategories (Figure 5). When examining differentiated BSW-relevant occupations, several nuances emerged. Child welfare worker and social worker remained the least-used occupational categories throughout the period, while social educator consistently remained the largest education-specific occupation. Milieu therapist became the second-largest from 2019 onwards, possibly

reflecting some success in union advocacy for the adoption of milieu therapist as a job title for BSW professionals. Notably, when disaggregated, assistant remained the largest occupational category throughout the period.

Figure 5

Percentage of BSW professionals employed as teachers, assistants, milieu therapists or in education-specific occupational categories, 2007-2024

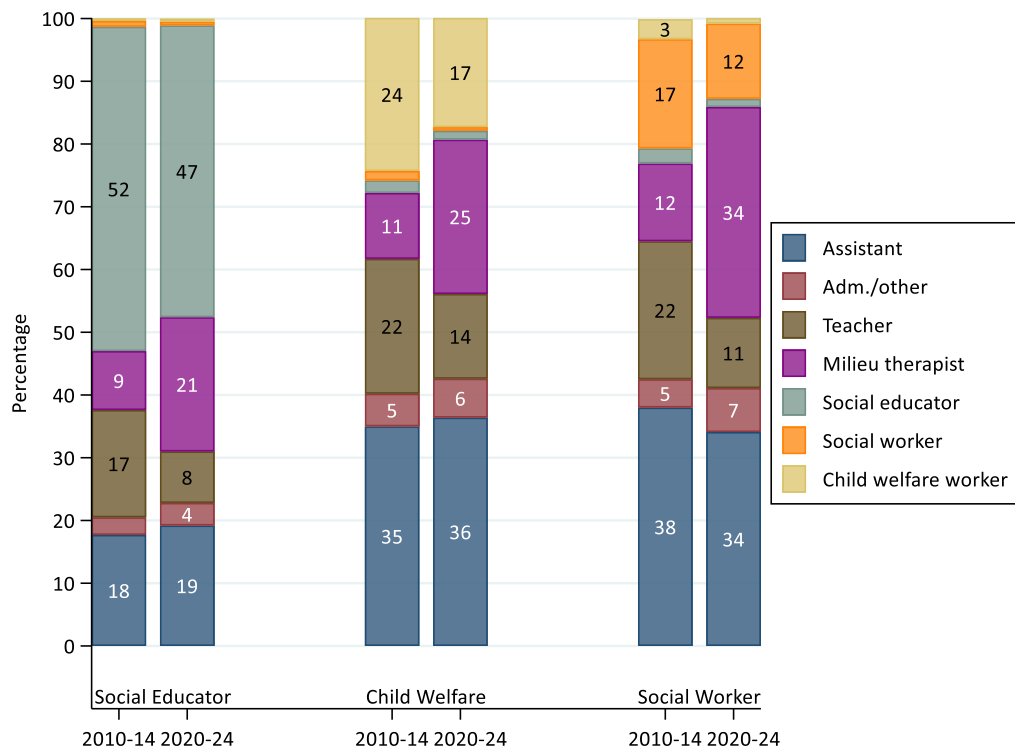


Occupational codes and educational background

To examine subgroup differences in status, we analysed the alignment between educational background and occupational category. We compared average distributions in an early and a late phase of the study period to capture potential changes within and between the subgroups, as shown in Figure 6. Education-specific occupational codes were predominantly used for individuals holding the corresponding qualification, although some BSW professionals were registered under occupations linked to one of the other two educational backgrounds.

Figure 6

Distribution of the three subgroups of BSW professionals across occupational categories



Our analysis of the first period revealed notable differences between the BSW professions in their distribution across occupational categories, particularly regarding education-specific occupations and the assistant category. In the period 2010-2014, 52% of social educators were registered in occupations explicitly aligned with their educational background, compared with 24% of child welfare workers and 17% of social workers. Meanwhile, social workers and child welfare workers were employed as assistants considerably more often than social educators. This difference between the three groups remained consistent over time. The decline in the teacher category was also present in all three groups. While the assistant category remained considerably more prevalent among child welfare workers and social workers than among social educators, movement into the milieu therapist category was particularly prominent among social workers.

Because occupational codes are intended to describe the nature of the work, our data suggest that social educators are recognised as a specific professional category relevant to schools more often than the other two professions, which most often hold occupations signalling generalist competencies. The recognition of BSW professionals' competence in such occupations appears less clear, given the continued use of the assistant category.

Employment percentage and salary level

Given that a substantial share of BSW professionals has been employed in positions not aligned with their educational level, we considered it important to further explore differences in status between all BSW professionals in occupations with and without educational requirements, including those in smaller positions. As indicators of appreciation and recognition of competence, we analysed employment percentages and salary levels.

The type of BSW education was associated with differences in employment percentage. Social educators had a slightly higher average employment percentage (82.6%) than child welfare workers (77.8%) and social workers (78.2%). The main difference, however, was between employment as an assistant and employment in occupations requiring a higher level of education. When BSW professionals across the three educational backgrounds were registered as assistants, the mean employment percentage was close to 70%. When their occupation was milieu therapist, social educator, child welfare worker or social worker, the average employment percentage was closer to 80%.

These data do not capture the tasks performed. However, the assistant occupational codes indicate lower educational requirements as well as lower levels of independence and autonomy. Lower employment percentages may therefore reflect less time spent in arenas where planning, evaluating and decision-making occur, potentially reinforcing assistants' subordinate position in the workplace division of labour.

Salary level is typically associated with the type of position held. To obtain a more precise measure of the difference between being employed as an assistant and being employed in a BSW-designated occupation, we compared wages. Estimated wage differences between BSW professionals in assistant positions and those in BSW occupational codes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Estimated wage gap for BSW-educated workers in assistant occupations compared with those in BSW-designated occupations: baseline and fixed-effects estimates

VARIABLES	(1) norm_w	(2) norm_w	(3) norm_w
Assistant	-0.142*** (0.006)	-0.044*** (0.003)	-0.044*** (0.004)
Observations	18,989	18,989	18,989
Controls	NO	YES	YES
FE	NO	NO	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. |

Note: The dependent variable is wage normalised as deviation from the mean wage among BSW-educated workers in the same year: $(\text{wage} - \text{mean wage}) / \text{mean wage}$. Controls in Model 2 include employment percentage only. Controls in Model 3 include having a master's degree, years since BSW education, years since BSW education squared and employment percentage. Fixed effects include year and municipality.

On average, the wage gap between BSW professionals in assistant positions and those in BSW-designated positions is approximately 14% of the mean wage. After controlling for employment percentage in Model 2, this gap narrows to 4.4%. This adjusted estimate remains robust when including additional controls for years since completing BSW education, master's degree, year, and home municipality in Model 3. These findings suggest that occupational titles signal how workers are valued in the labour market, although differences in employment percentage explain a substantial part of the wage gap. To further explore the assistant position, we compared BSW-educated assistants with paraprofessionals holding a certificate in child and youth care (Table 2).

Table 2

Estimated wage gap for BSW-educated in assistant occupations compared with paraprofessionals in assistant occupations

VARIABLES	(1) norm_w
Assistant BSW	0.128*** (0.004)
Observations	72,111
Controls	YES
FE	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Note: The dependent variable is wage normalised as deviation from the mean wage among assistants (BSW- or vocationally educated) in the same year: $(\text{wage} - \text{mean wage}) / \text{mean wage}$. Controls include having a master's degree, years worked in school, years worked in school squared and employment percentage. Fixed effects include year and municipality.

We found that the wage gap between BSW-educated assistants and paraprofessionals with a certificate in child and youth care in the same position is approximately 13% of the mean assistant wage. This suggests that employers may recognise and reward the additional competencies associated with BSW education, even when individuals are not formally employed in BSW-designated positions. The assistant position thus appears occupationally ambiguous: it is not fully recognised as BSW-level work, yet BSW-educated workers in this position are compensated above workers with vocational child and youth care training.

Discussion

This study explored the employment patterns of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools and how they have changed over time in the absence of legislative anchoring. We found a substantial increase in the employment of BSW professionals in schools over the 27-year period studied, with 52% of schools employing one or more by 2024. We also found a somewhat stronger association between BSW education and occupations related to school social work over time. In the following, we discuss how these findings may contribute to understanding the status of the BSW profession within schools. As an exploratory study, our analysis also raises questions and identifies avenues for future research that extend beyond the scope of this article.

School social work as a new jurisdiction?

Although BSW professionals remain a minority within the total school workforce, their growing presence may contribute to jurisdictional changes. Jurisdictional change generally takes place either through external shifts that open a new jurisdiction or through professions actively seeking new territory (Abbott, 1988, p. 90). The growth of BSW professionals in schools may reflect active efforts by BSW professionals in the workplace arena to establish a position within schools as one of several welfare-state sectors where they see their social work competence as relevant (Håvie, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2025). Professions' unions have also claimed jurisdiction in legal and public arenas, by demanding that milieu therapists become a legal requirement in schools and advocating for BSW professionals' qualifications for this position.

Furthermore, shifts external to the BSW profession, such as policy signals and changes in teachers' working conditions, may help explain the expansion of their employment to half of all schools. Although school social work is not established as a distinct jurisdiction through direct governance, educational policy has increasingly emphasised inclusion, psychosocial well-being and the diverse needs of students while promoting interprofessional collaboration as a means of addressing these issues (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). These developments may be understood as indirect forms of governance, communicated through ideological means of power (Sivesind, 2024). These policy shifts, together with the jurisdictional claims made in the public arena, may have led schools to view the employment of BSW professionals as a legitimate and valid solution to challenges, at least in the years following the White Paper *Time for Learning* (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010)) and the *Support Network* projects (Borg et al., 2015), which contributed to *the support network* becoming an established term in discourse around schools.

Our findings indicate a stronger association between BSW education and occupational positioning in schools over time, as demonstrated in the shift from the 'teacher' to 'BSW' occupation. Profession-specific occupational titles are difficult to interpret in terms of task content because BSW professions lack formally established jurisdictions within schools. However, school leaders have emphasised generalist BSW competence over profession-specific qualifications in milieu therapist roles (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Eek et al., 2024). We therefore interpret both profession-specific and milieu therapist occupational codes as reflecting recognition of generalist BSW competence in school social work.

Beyond their descriptive function, occupational titles may carry symbolic value in jurisdictional claims made in the public arena. The growth of the milieu therapist category may reflect union-level jurisdictional negotiations while simultaneously signalling that school social work is not a jurisdiction belonging to a single profession. In the present study, we analyse the positioning of BSW professionals within schools as an indication of whether their social work competence is recognised. Therefore, we cannot conclude whether the BSW profession has

gained control over the milieu therapist role in schools. Future research could use the milieu therapist position as a starting point to examine the extent to which it represents a site of jurisdictional competition between occupational groups and which qualifications, beyond BSW education, are recognised as relevant.

The ambiguous assistant position

The assistant position is relevant when discussing professional status. Professional work involves classifying problems, reasoning about them and acting upon them based on a profession's knowledge base (Abbott, 1988). Assistant positions, however, are associated with lower autonomy and lower educational requirements and traditionally occupy a supporting role to a superordinate profession. This could imply that one-third of BSW professionals in schools are not expected to participate in the full scope of professional practice.

BSW assistants' salaries suggest that their competence is recognised and rewarded despite their occupational position. However, both salary levels and employment percentages were lower than in BSW-designated occupations, indicating a possible devaluation of BSW competence.

Several factors may contribute to this ambiguous assistant position. Schools and municipalities balance multiple demands, including financial pressures, students' legal rights, and external control (Caspersen et al., 2026). Educational policy has repeatedly emphasised the need for additional professional competence in schools to support students and relieve teachers of tasks, thereby allowing them to focus on their core responsibilities (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010); Meld. St. 20 (2012-2013); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). At the same time, social pedagogical support for students remains part of teachers' professional mandate. The continued use of assistant positions may partly reflect this overlap, indicating that BSW professionals are positioned within teachers' jurisdiction rather than developing a distinct social work jurisdiction. Further research is needed to examine whether and how assistant positions shape professional practice.

The relationship between BSW professionals and child and youth care workers may also be an important area for future research. Claims that BSW professionals can operate as equals to teachers at the individual, group and system levels may imply the emergence of a social work jurisdiction in which paraprofessionals, who substantially outnumber BSW professionals, become subordinated to them.

Individual needs or inclusive practices?

We have argued that the use of any of the three BSW titles may indicate a school social work position. However, social educators stood out as the only profession whose most frequently used title was directly linked to their specific education. They also had slightly higher employment percentages. In contrast to previous reports, we found that social educators were employed as assistants less frequently than child welfare and social workers. Taken together,

these findings suggest that social educators have a somewhat stronger position than the other two professions.

The public image of a profession changes very slowly (Abbott, 1988), and the historical link between social educators and the care of people with intellectual disabilities may have influenced their position in schools. Previous studies have suggested that social educators in schools often support students with special educational needs, indicating that their employment may be more readily legitimised through individual special education decisions. Their comparatively stronger position may therefore reflect recognition of specific competences related to legally regulated individual needs, rather than indicating hierarchically superior status to other BSW professions in schools. Furthermore, a stronger link between education and occupation does not necessarily entail greater professional autonomy. In special education, teachers still formally hold jurisdiction, which may position social educators in a subordinate role.

While social educators may have a stronger connection to special education, the employment of BSW professionals more broadly has also been legitimised through individual special education decisions (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Eek et al., 2024). This may point to individual needs and legal rights as structural factors shaping professional practice in schools, as well as to the critique of the discrepancy between policy intentions and actual change towards more inclusive education for all (Haug, 2024). The 'support network' projects aimed to enhance interprofessional collaboration while avoiding exclusionary practices (Borg et al., 2015). Developing new practices, such as employing BSW professionals in roles beyond individual student support, may depend on collegial and leadership support (Borg & Lyng, 2019), while organisational factors have also been highlighted as crucial (Borg et al., 2022; Michelsen, 2019).

In this study, we have only briefly addressed organisational aspects such as employment percentage and the distribution of BSW professionals across schools. Working-time agreement has been a central issue for teachers regarding professional control over when, where, and how their work is performed and may therefore be important for new professions entering schools. Further research is also needed to determine whether the increase in schools employing four or more BSW professionals could be related to an increase in specialised departments or alternative learning arenas. Because creating more inclusive practices involves reflection on and changes to overall school practices (Haug, 2024; Nordhagen et al., 2022), further research is needed to determine the extent to which the BSW professionals contribute primarily to remedial individual support measures or to the broader development of inclusive school practices.

Conclusion

This study provides the first national longitudinal overview of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools. It shows substantial growth in their employment from 1997 to 2024, with half of all schools employing one or more in 2024.

The findings suggest increased recognition of BSW education in schools, alongside continued variation in occupational positioning, with one-third employed in assistant positions. Together, these findings indicate that BSW professions have gained a more established position in schools, while their professional status in this context remains underdeveloped. The somewhat stronger position of social educators may indicate a connection to special education. However, further research is needed to examine how formal positions relate to professional practice and how BSW competence contributes to Norwegian compulsory schools as arenas for inclusion, participation and learning.

Limitations

This study is limited to BSW professionals employed directly in schools; their status within municipal-level interprofessional support services for teachers and students falls outside the scope of the analysis.

The period analysed coincides with a phase of relative economic prosperity for Norwegian municipalities. As noted in evaluations of the teacher norm, this favourable context may partly explain why no clear changes in BSW employment were observed despite the norm's constraints on principals' autonomy in staffing decisions. It remains uncertain whether future variations in municipal economic resources will affect the position and integration of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools. Further research could examine these dynamics.

As occupational codes are registered by school leaders or their delegates, some degree of misclassification due to human error cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, the patterns identified in our material are based on a large number of observations and are likely to capture meaningful variation in occupational positioning. The supplementary analyses of salary and employment percentage lend further support to this interpretation.

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